

**Testimony of
Congressman Tom Allen
Before the House Committee on the Budget
on Special Education Funding
March 8, 2001**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Spratt, and other committee members, thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify before the Committee about the Budget Resolution for Fiscal Year 2002.

Today, I want to speak on special education, and urge the Committee to fund the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) in full, this year. No phase-ins. No excuses. With these budget surpluses, the time is now to fulfill, at last, an old promise.

In 1975, Congress enacted IDEA, and authorized the federal government to cover 40 percent of the costs of special education in order to provide all students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education. To date, however, the government has never provided more than 14.9 percent.

In Fiscal Year 2001, Congress appropriated \$6.3 billion (14.9 percent) for special education assistance through the grants to states program. According to the Department of Education, approximately \$17.7 billion would represent the full 40 percent funding formula for Fiscal Year 2002. This is an increase of about \$11.4 billion over current funding levels. With the on-going budget debate in Washington focusing on how to use trillions in surpluses (\$5.6 trillion in surpluses and \$1.6 trillion (or more) in tax cuts), budgeting \$17.7 billion for special education costs is not asking too much. If we invest only a fraction of the estimated surpluses we can help states, towns, and cities meet the needs of all their students in a way they choose.

In conversations with teachers, legislators, families, and others in my home state of Maine, the number one challenge facing local school districts today is the cost of educating special education students. Everyone suffers because the federal government has reneged on its commitment to fund 40 percent of special education costs. Students with disabilities often do not receive necessary aid; students without disabilities miss out on programs that cannot be funded; and local property taxpayers experience a high tax burden.

Congress talks a lot about fully funding this mandate, but never puts up the money to actually do it. We pass non-binding resolutions on full funding to make us feel good, but then leave our local school districts out to dry. Last year, the House passed, by a vote of 413-2, H.Con.Res. 84, to urge Congress and the President to fund fully its obligations under IDEA. It specifically stated that the President and Congress must "give programs under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.) the highest priority among Federal elementary and secondary education programs by meeting the commitment to fund the maximum State grant allocation for educating children with disabilities under such Act prior to authorizing or appropriating funds for any new education initiative."

Yet, what good are such feel-good resolutions when we consistently ignore them at

budget time, and consistently ignore the promise we made to our states?

Today, we talk of education reform and how to leave no child behind. Proposals have been aired to cut funding for failing schools after three years. Well, Congress and the President should first look at its own track record regarding special education. We have been failing our obligations since 1975. But that does not mean we have to keep failing. We can succeed by meeting our 40 percent obligation, now.

There is one solution that achieves true reform. It is not more resolutions, or phase-in bills, or enacting “catchy” reforms. It is simply to budget \$17.7 billion for special education costs this year, and make full funding of special education an old promise with a new future. The bill can be paid, and our responsibility met, without pain, if you compare this modest investment with the amounts proposed for other uses of the surplus, like the proposed tax cut of \$1.6 trillion.

Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman, Mr. Spratt, and other members of this Committee for allowing me to testify. I look forward to working to ensure that the federal government finally meets its mandate of funding 40 percent of special education costs, and I urge the Committee to budget \$17.7 billion this year to make this mandate a reality.